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ABSTRACT

A technical writing course required as part of an external degree program (EDP) offered to military personnel provides a profile of successful use of the noncampus classroom as a teaching environment. An understanding of the interests and attitudes of military students is essential, with pragmatism and idealism as the instructor's survival skills. A definition of the external class must be clear and course objectives should be primarily behavioral and nonabstract, emphasizing performance rather than comprehension. Other recommendations are: lesson plans should emphasize doing and discussing; instructional materials directed toward the interests and abilities of off-campus students should be collected or manufactured; teaching methods should be dictated largely by expediency and the environment; students should be given a choice of assignments in order to achieve an objective; evaluations should involve both objective and informal pretests and posttests of student performance and should also provide for a range of student performance to be given credit. A weakness of the program is that no efforts have been made to obtain an outside evaluation of the EDP courses, although the growth of the program testifies to the approval it receives from the major military commands who contract for it. (A sample lesson plan and student assignment handout are included.) (AEA)

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The English Classroom in an External Degree Program--A Viable Learning Environment for the 1980s

Paper prepared for review for
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The NCTE, 1974 "Statement on the Preparation of Teachers of English and the Language Arts" urges that teachers today be prepared for a teaching environment not of the 1960s but of the 1970s with accountability emphasis on "divergent thinking," "individualized programs," and "adult programs for people who have interrupted their studies and now return to them with fresh energy and broader perspectives" (p. 4). Some assumptions implicit in the Statement's definition of adult students are dubious but for the present, consider a teaching environment that is indeed a phenomenon peculiar to the 1970s, the External Degree Program (EDP). Consider, too, what teachers should expect when they prepare to work with EDP students, the "new clienteles" of the education marketplace.

External Degree Programs Defined

The (NIE) Guide to Undergraduate External Degree Programs in the United States may dispell some incorrect notions about EDPs.

> In descriptive terms, it is a program emphasizing minimal classroom coursework and minimal residence requirements. It generally allows considerable transfer credit for prior documentable learning obtained through a variety of sources (e.g., work experience, life experience, coursework taken in other institutions, in military settings or in places of employment) and emphasizes individually-designed, self-directed study. "Faculty" contact often is only advisory in nature (rather than instructional). Traditional grades are often not a part of the system of evaluation, and award of "credit" or evaluation may be accomplished in several ways (e.g., through critique of the portfolio of the student's work, through letter or report testifying on progress by a tutor or other supervisor, through narrative evaluation of a completed project by the faculty advisor or through tests and examinations [NOCTI, CLEP and DANTES are popular examples]). Transcripts may be entirely narrative (i.e., with no "grades" or course titles, etc.) or may combine grade "evaluation" with narrative sections about work completed. (1977, p. 1)

The 1976-77 survey included only institutions offering "a program in which not more than 24 percent of the work required for degree completion had to be in the form of campus-based classroom instruction," thus, external degree programs are essentially non-campus learning ones that may be somewhat informally structured. Well-designed EDPs can provide teachers with an opportunity to bring their skills to a neglected community where conventional classroom schedules and hours are unfeasible but where the potential for student achievement is high.

External degree programs have been objects of considerable public controversy. A feature story in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "The Shanghai of Higher Education," (December 4, 1978, p. 6) raises serious questions about programs with numerous "independent study" courses, with self-paced instruction, and "individual" majors. Fortunately, my institution, although mentioned in the Chronicle's story, was not indicted for awarding misleading diplomas, so perhaps Southern Illinois University's external degree program can offer a profile of the non-campus classroom as a teaching environment.

A Case of the External Degree Program--Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

The Office of Military Programs at the University's School of Technical Careers has indicated substantial growth in enrollment from 500 in 1978 to

1979:	Aviation Management	375 students
	Health Care Management	425
	Fire Science Management	55
	Electronics	30

These figures do not reflect bachelor degree candidates from Vocational Education in the University's College of Education.

Our EDP, started in 1975, should continue to grow until 1985 when the G.I. Bill expires. EDP enrollments then will decline no more than predicted averages in American universities because external degree programs can still receive seventy-five percent of their funds at the discretion of major military commands in the United States. Military participants in external degree programs after 1985 will still be eligible for tuition assistance. Thus, external degree programs should remain stable and productive.

A unique strength of our EDP is the requirement that a student take technical writing as a majors course in addition to other English courses taken elsewhere. Although some resident students can proficiency the first semester of freshman composition, no off-campus student may proficiency Technical Writing. Furthermore, the School of Technical Careers considers English education so important in a student's growth as a future professional, that all external degree program students must complete forty-eight classroom hours of Technical Writing as the second course in their program sequence. This EDP requirement offers some encouragement to those of us who believe that English education does indeed teach "divergent" thinking. We are training technicians to enter industry or to move up in the military service to middle management level and proficient use of English is an essential survival and success skill. So much for the myth that all technical educators consider communication skills and their implied humanitarian values irrelevant.

Technical Writing is the second course in a program that allows a student whose previous college coursework meets admission requirements to complete a Bachelor of Science degree in sixteen months of consecutive

coursework. The technical writing course lasts for three weekend sessions of two eight-hour days each. The course takes six weeks, one weekend in class from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and one alternate weekend off. The teacher, a fulltime member of the Southern Illinois University faculty, is flown to the military base to deliver the course to students. Although the logistics of such a system and the jet lag of the instructor can create complications, the rationale for flying-in a campus-based teacher is to assure the EDP writing program of the same quality offered at the Carbondale campus. Also, the use of campus-based teachers allows for "accountability," another requisite in the teaching environment of the 1970s and 1980s. If complaints occur, or if the instructor has problems, they can be settled as they would be for campus-based students.

Profile of the External Degree Student

An important index of the teaching environment of an EDP writing program is a profile of military students. An appropriate attitude toward the teaching assignment and toward developing materials is essential. On this point I differ with the NCTE Statement's description of adult students having "fresh energy" and "broader perspectives than they had when younger" (p. 4).

Military service personnel arrive at their Saturday 8:00 a.m. session looking haggard from night duty, a sixty-hour workweek, or from moonlighting to make family financial ends meet. They also look and act frightened because they have been successful in military education programs in avionics, fixed-wing aircraft engine repair, foreign languages and other sophisticated training, yet they have retained their old fear of English, that dreaded course in

high school. For example, in one class of Marines at El Toro, twenty-eight of thirty students had been consistent "losers" in the battle with English both in high school and in community college courses.

Furthermore, people who entered military service at the age of eighteen and have lived in the peculiar environment of that lifestyle rarely have the "broader perspectives" so frequently assumed by educators. Certainly most of these students have traveled extensively; many are combat veterans as well. However, the class--especially in the era of the all volunteer army--is composed of professional military who live a civilian life off-duty but who often fear that adjustment to a less obviously structured civilian work place which they will probably choose when their twenty year tours are up. As they fear their required writing course, military students also hope it will provide models of civilian communication styles so students will be prepared to compete successfully for jobs on the "outside."

Typically, a writing class has twenty-five to thirty students whose median age is 30. (In this case, the class conforms to the data on non-traditional students compiled by NIE, External Degrees: Program and Student Characteristics, 1978, p. 17.) Most students have been in service twelve years, have attended at least three advanced training schools in technical areas, are married and have two children. They are approaching the second half of their military careers and hope through more advanced training and a college degree to enter the job market in a competitive role at forty. (External Degrees: Program and Student Characteristics, 1978, pp. 17-19). Thus the college degree will serve as a passport to better employment and to promotion within the military service. Pragmatism rather than idealism characterizes the attitude these students bring to the classroom.

The class usually contains a few men and women in their twenties many of whom see the degree as a chance to enter another branch of the service as officers. Also, junior grade officers with associate degrees who seek promotion form another sometimes harrassed minority. Finally the close to twenty-year men, either "mustangers" (enlisted men promoted from the ranks to officers) or advanced non-commissioned officers form a final minority. Often these students feel embarrassed by their presence in an English class, although they usually work the hardest.

Like other adult learners, military students appreciate informality in the classroom. It would be a mistake, however, to confuse personal informality with a loose course outline. Students who have trained in military courses are accustomed to detailed guidelines for peformance and evaluation. Many of them have completed self-instruction modules; others have studied in the military competency-based courses. The class wants to see rules for success at the outset. Telling students that themes will be graded on the basis of usage and content--common campus criteria--will not win the confidence or the respect of the class. A point system for grading is more appropriate to their methodical mindset.

Finally, and most important, the teacher and students spend two intensive, eight-hour sessions together each weekend of class. This structure changes radically any previous lesson plan the instructor may prefer. The teacher's organization and creativity must preclude information overload while delivering a college level course in three sixteen-hour weekends.

Pragmatism and Idealism--the Instructor's Survival Skills

If current National Institute of Education predictions about the growth of external degree programs are correct, faculty who worry about declining

enrollments in traditional campus programs will have to make major adjustments to teach the non-traditional student of the 1980s. First, the instructor is not an authoritarian figure in a classroom of adults. (Consider the ridiculous figure of an authoritarian English teacher before a class of Viet Nam-experienced Marines.) Teachers who fear being addressed by their first names might consider avoiding an EDP classroom. Teaching off-campus exposes the instructor to intensive education, eight hours a day, and demands superior flexibility both psychological and pedagogic. These characteristics are crucial to the success of an external degree writing course and distinguish traditional from external classrooms in definition, objectives, materials, methods, sequence and evaluation.

Definition

Because of scheduling differences between campus and external English courses, a definition of the external class must be clear. On campus, we have a full quarter or semester to learn about our students. If we make mistakes in evaluating their abilities, we have weeks to provide remediation, to offer encouragement and to permit negotiation of rules. Off campus, time robs us of any extended dialogue with students. The instructor as a trained researcher must comb through students' records for a class profile; if the instructor is not a member of the majority constituency represented in the class, such as a non-veteran, he or she needs to do some practical research to understand the constituency to be addressed. This may mean learning the metaphors for and classification of aircraft. It may mean conferring with administrators, former students, fellow faculty or ex-GIs to discern some rules of etiquette the class would expect. (For example, how do you ask an all male class of Marines if you can use their "head"

because they don't have one for women within a mile of the classroom?) In an external degree program, unless an instructor sizes up the class correctly, class materials may miss the intended mark and the class cannot be reorganized because at the start of the first lesson the teacher has an eight hour block to structure.

Objectives

Course objectives are presented at the first class meeting either in a list on the blackboard, in a handout of assignments or, if one has convenient aides, with the use of the overhead projector. The behavioral objectives of the technical writing course for campus use were: students will distinguish between writing papers of a general nature and preparing reports that follow a tight format characterized by specific terms and graphics; students will analyze the audience for whom they write technical reports; and students will manifest awareness of usage differences in informal and technical writing. With a class of career military students, these objectives are unsuitable. The class understands primarily behavioral non-abstract objectives stated as performance rather than comprehension. Most students in off-campus programs are impatient with the theoretical aspects of technical writing; they view classwork as a job and they express annoyance if the instructor fails to state how to do a job. Therefore, the four objectives listed above must appear in less esoteric form for military students: you will write a report of no more than 10 pages on a technical topic using at least one table, one graph, a photograph and containing five sections listed below; you will revise long sentences in class and reduce them to seven to ten word sentences with active voice verbs,you will write a letter to me your instructor, a memo to a group of aircraft mechanics, and a set of directions for a person who has no mechanical skills; you will

memorize correct use of the period, colon, semi-colon, comma and dash.

The two lists of objectives cover the same material. The first assumes regular contact and mastery of logical inductions; the second relinquishes induction to the pragmatic world of technical work where the rules for completing a job appear in aircraft maintenance manuals.

Sequence

Perhaps the greatest adjustment those who contemplate working in external English classrooms must make occurs in sequencing material. For example, after six meetings with their technical writing instructor external degree students must submit a feasibility report. Typically, in a campus classroom, the instructor and students have at least twelve weeks to design and clarify such a project. How does one plan a sequence that can present fairly an assignment as general as a report to an off-campus English class? Given the nature of the class, military personnel, I work from the most specific information to the least specific. (Attached is a schedule which demonstrates the adjustments the instructor must anticipate. See the attached handout that the student receives.)

	Saturday	Sunday
Weekend 1		
a.m.	How to plan and outline a report. Discuss the assigned topic. (Same for everyone) Name and define parts of report.	How to prepare a list of references. Where do we find references for this project? (Library vs. practical research.)
p.m.	A sample formula for organizing a report. Hand out Pratt-Whitney formula. Rap session: Students will anticipate problems of organization.	How to write an informative abstract. Hand out example and outline; give article to students and have them abstract.
Weekend 2		
a.m.	Rap session: Problems of organizing report. Have students compare functional and spatial modes of organization.	How to write instructions. Use handouts for demonstration. What writing skills can be used in report?
p.m.	Use Fog Index. How does it apply to report writing? Have students analyze research material using Fog Index.	Using technical examples, Intro. Definition description c/c and cause/ effect. Where in the report will students use each?
Weekend 3		
a.m.	Introduce proofreading and editing symbols. Have students edit each other's rough drafts.	8:00 Hand in reports.
p.m.	Review of objectives for final exam. Last review of objectives for grading report.	

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STC 102

Feasbility Report

Objective: To write a feasbility report about a technical topic.
To use language which will make that topic understandable to a civilian.

Audience: The instructor

Assignment: You are transferred to another state. You will pick the name of the state from a hat in class. You will live in the geographic middle of the state. Because you are moving, you must buy a new car for your use and for that of your family. Select your top three choices; then justify your first choice in relation to your second and third choices. Your choice must be affordable within the range of your present military pay. You may not take into account other income such as a spouse's. Other factors dictating your choice are listed: climate, amount of use, cost, maintenance. List others we discuss in class here.

Date Due: Sunday, March 18, 8:00 a.m.

Outline to be followed in writing the report.

Abstract (Informative, H.P., p. 165).

Illustrations (in this case, tables comparing performances of the top three choices, tables comparing costs, photographs, etc.)

Introduction

Factual Summary

Conclusions

Recommendations

References

Length of report: 10 double-space typewritten pages approximately.

This excercise requires that you do practical rather than library research. Your best reference book for obtaining information will be your county telephone book.

Don't forget--you will use this topic for your oral report to be delivered March 17 or 18.

My short lesson plan emphasizes doing and discussing. The basic objective is to make all assignments point to appropriate writing style for the feasibility report. Well designed instructions for doing the report save students' time, but I do not edit out essential learning experiences. For example, I choose the topic for them--the purchase of a car. I avoid a topic in aviation because each student in the class is a specialist in aviation--instrumentation, air traffic control, maintenance, logistics, etc. To solve this problem (and also to avoid plagiarism of military manuals) I assign a topic which requires the class to study cars and translate the technical material they unearth into civilian terms.

The straightforward feasibility report assignment which states objectives, audience, and method of organization creates a positive attitude among students. They can start doing their research with the yellow pages of their local telephone directory. They will, therefore, have to learn to document both conventional and unconventional sources. They will have to speak with car sales personnel, thus polishing civilian communication skills. Furthermore, these students are transferred every few years so the assignment seems reasonable to them. With minimal non-library research (because military students often do not have access to research libraries) students can learn to write a report which requires that comparisons be studied, explanations given, and civilian judgment used.

In sequencing objectives of this course, I try to touch on an objective five times, that is, at each morning or afternoon meeting. This gives students time to anticipate problems and to bring them up at the next discussion. The same sequence can be followed for working on usage problems,

rhetorical style, and technical writing formats such as correspondence, technical instructions, and the writing of manuals.

Materials

Objectives, sequence, and materials are inevitably related. If you have to travel to a new location to conduct an external class, you should prepare materials that will suit the classroom assigned and transcend limitations that may exist. For example, I like to use filmstrips to encourage writing and I like to use the overhead projector to outline discussions of objectives. However, when I taught in San Diego last fall, all the transparencies the Learning Resources Center had prepared for me sat in their folders because on three different weekends I was given three different broken overhead projectors, and the screen had not yet arrived. The lesson: handouts. It is a nuisance to cart them with you but you know they will work in a strange classroom. But a more important lesson appears. Very few texts are suitable for non-traditional, external degree English students. Although Houp and Pearsall provide a background for the class, I collect and manufacture most of my own materials much more so than when I teach on campus where we have a research library, a good newspaper, guest lecturers and the rest. People who want to train for external program teaching should collect and prepare instructional aids directed toward the interests and abilities of their clienteles.

Often materials effective with off-campus students are neither "innovative" nor do they rely on catchy audiovisual displays. For example, in teaching correspondence, I used four sample letters to point out the differences between military and civilian communications. The first letter copied

directly from the Staff Non Commissioned Officers Academy Resident Course Effective Communication (p. 19) uses a complicated system of abbreviations and spacing as required format. Its blunt "from," "to," "via," "subj.," "ref.," and "encl." hardly conform to civilian correspondence format as we know it. However, this is the format with which military students are most familiar. The format is a requirement in military correspondence; penalties for non-compliance are exacting. A person can be passed over for promotion if his or her military correspondence does not conform to this format. Some of the students in my class have been writing in this format for twenty years; the average student has used it for ten. After the students make routine jokes about the well-known change of orders letter, I show them two letters and a memorandum written in civilian block style to my superior, Arden Pratt. The civilian letters, one on letterhead, another on plain stock remind Arden Pratt that he must complete several forms so that I may read a paper at a professional meeting.

To simplify matters, I avoid discussions of whether the block or modified block format should prevail. The students will have information overload simply learning civilian correspondence style so all three letters use the same format. When students receive an attached worksheet, I ask them to list the most superficial differences they can find among the letters and memorandum provided. As students notice and comment on format differences such as the placing of the date on a letter without a letterhead and on one with a letterhead, I make notes for the class on the board or on the overhead projector (if it works). For the test on letterwriting, students will be

tested on knowledge of format alone; this objectivity appeals to them in view of their military classroom experience.

Eventually, someone in the class notices that I seem to be doing a lot of paper work to tell my dean, Arden Pratt, that I am taking a trip and that he has already approved both the trip and my absence. At this point, I lead the class to a discussion of my hidden objective for this lesson--teaching military students how civilians create effective paper trails so that they can be evaluated as competent, responsible, and successful. Soon, someone in the class mentions that in order to deliver a paper for Southern Illinois University, I do even more paperwork than a member of the military service does. From this point on, we can discuss situations in which civilians have to write letteers 1.) to tell the boss what he or she is supposed to know but doesn't; 2.) to record accomplishments that we want superiors to notice when promotions are reviewed; 3.) to record who one's subordinates are and what their responsibilities are. After a discussion of these letters, students approach writing letters of complaint with zeal. The next day, replies to the complaints are written in class.

I would never use this assignment with college freshmen on campus. Most freshmen have chosen their majors, but they are not yet interested in the communications of occupational survival. External, non-traditional students, on the other hand, know that survival skills can sometimes compensate for limited competence; for them the comparison of letters and resulting discussion is a necessary assignment. The secret to the assignment's effectiveness is its initial emphasis upon form rather than content. Students then

discover the content and accept the hidden objective instead of rejecting it as esoteric.

Methods

Teachers in external degree programs will quickly learn that methods are dictated largely by expediency and the environment assigned to the teacher. Often sophisticated audiovisual equipment is lacking so presentation is restricted to the trusty old handout. Military students, many of whom are instructors themselves, are accustomed to behavioral objectives, competency-based learning and objective examinations. They are comfortable with lectures but not as a steady diet. The most important compromise a teacher must make with a group of EDP students is the elimination of as much writing as is assigned to students on campus. There simply isn't time for the instructor to grade all the needed writing and return suggestions to the students in time for them to practice and profit from corrections.

I recommend, therefore, that students be given a choice of assignments in order to achieve an objective. For example, the class will have a normal distribution of students needing remedial skills. Instead of having these students compete with more advanced adults, I give them a remedial test which they grade but which does not affect their course grade. When students see they are weak in usage they welcome the chance to work on exercises in a group,while more advanced students work in another group to handle the complexities of writing the same set of directions for three different audiences. To avoid information overload, the eight hour day should be broken into as many methods and styles as the instructor's repertoire commands. A list of variations in methods can be correlated with time-structuring.

8:00 a.m.	basic skills test
8:20	in class students grade their basic skills test
8:30	students discuss class weaknesses and strengths with teacher
8:30--9:30	students and teacher discuss article from Professional Pilot on how poorly written reports by pilots confuse mechanics
9:30--9:45	introduce four methods of organizing writing: definition, description, comparison and contrast, cause and effect. lecture with examples from Professional Pilot
10:45--noon	students choose two of the four methods outlined and write a paragraph using each method. paragraph is about communication problems at work
1:00--2:00	student reports and class evaluations of the reports
2:00--4:00	introduction of the concept that will be developed the next morning; for example, documentation can be demonstrated, practiced and discussed in preparation for the next morning's presentation of organizing a technical report into five parts.

This hypothetical schedule divides the day into times of discussion, doing things, and lecture. Military students enjoy being asked to perform and to compete because they are trained to do so. Competition that is productive in a military classroom could be quite destructive in a civilian class. In short, methods for teaching an EDP class are as diversified as objectives and materials will permit.

Evaluation

Because military students have survived many objective evaluations, this form of evaluation is appropriate in EDP technical writing classes. A range of points for each assignment to be graded is announced the first day of class. With campus students, such formality is less appropriate. Also, since one missed weeked is a third of a semester lost in an EDP class, penalties are severe for absence (unless the student has duty).

The tight grading structure applies only to students who take an EDP course for credit. In evaluating the work of non-traditional students, an instructor must keep in mind that such students work, raise families and

attend school. They simply do not have the time to spend on assignments that the campus-based adolescent does. Evaluating external students' performances and improvements will be difficult for any instructor who does not estimate realistically the pressures under which these students operate. At the same time, however, these students have chosen to enroll in a college-credit courses.Yielding to grade inflation is as unfair as failing to recognize the pressures adult students face. Therefore, any evaluation should involve both objective and informal pre and post-tests of student performance and it should also provide for a range of student performance to be given credit. For example, an announcement that feasibility reports will account for twenty-five points or one quarter of their grade, warrants a further explanation that a score below ten is an E and a score of thirteen or below is a D. This system allows students to evaluate performance on both numerical and letter grade scales.

On campus, final examinations in writing courses are less reliable than is a final paper for evaluating the student's performance. Off campus with military students, an objective final is based on outlines from the text-book and upon objectives taught in class discussion and in lectures. This examination counts for another twenty-five percent of a student's grade. It is important to provide as many methods for students to demonstrate competence as time allows. For example, off campus students must do a presentation because some students are strong speakers and can gain confidence as well as instruct others by doing so. On campus when students will be required to take speech in their general studies curriculum oral reports are less important. The more the teacher in an EDP environment diversifies the

opportunities for measuring student performance, the more chance class members have to demonstrate their competence.

Since 1975, several hundred students have received diplomas from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale through the external degree program offered at over twenty different military bases in the United States. Certainly in my ten years in the teaching profession, the experience with students in the external degree program has been the most challenging. Unfortunately, I cannot demonstrate that the challenge has existed for the students as well as for the instructor. Student evaluations testify that they are well instructed and well satisfied. Also, placement files indicate that students who are completing the program have received commissions and have entered the civilian workforce at the middle management level.

One weakness of the STC program is growth so rapid that all efforts have had to go into curriculum development and to delivering the needed classes to military bases. Consequently, no outside evaluation of the program has occurred although the growth of the program testifies to the approval it receives from the major military commands who contract for it. During the next year of teaching I plan to assess objectively my technical writing students' abilities upon entering and completing the course with standardized pre- and post-tests. Presently, several instructors are developing an instrument to measure graduates' opinions of the program. Certainly, the development of instruments to measure student performance both before and after completion of the program must receive top priority so that more than intuitive comparisons can be made between external students and their campus counterparts.

Notes

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